

Humans, nonhumans and the mediation of workplace learning in the senior school curriculum

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Abstract

This paper brings together concepts drawn from Actor Network Theory (ANT) and data generated in a research project that was conducted across the island of Ireland. Using surveys and interviews with school staff, that research explored the limits and possibilities for workplace learning as a valued component of the senior school curriculum. The current paper works with the data from the Republic of Ireland only and brings into focus the full range of actors — both human and nonhuman — that generate, or constrain, productive workplace learning opportunities for students. In the wake of the Great Recession, it is suggested that such opportunities have gained increased importance. The analysis suggests attention to the full range of actors highlights areas for intervention, and the possibilities for alliances that may be beneficial for students and their schools, for employers who provide workplace learning placements, and for vocational learning itself.

Introduction

This paper revisits a research project that was conducted across the island of Ireland during 2013 (Kamp and Black 2014). Funded by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North & South (SCoTENS), the research explored the limits and possibilities of workplace learning undertaken by students within the senior school curriculum in the aftermath of the Financial Crisis (GFC) that unfurled from 2008. In this paper, I am revisiting the data generated in the Republic of Ireland given the extreme economic circumstances in the Republic at the time of the research and the consequential challenges for young people facing transition to first time employment.

Widely seen as one of the most successful global economies immediately prior to the GFC, ‘Celtic Tiger’ Ireland experienced a profound economic collapse in its wake resulting in an European Union/International Monetary Fund (EU/IMF) bailout and, from 2010, consequential austerity measures. The economic collapse had consequences, of greater or lesser measure, for all Irish residents. However young people in transition to first time employment, and young children, were particularly affected. The EU/IMF bailout and the

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austerity policies that came hand-in-hand with it are evidenced in worsening well-being indicators for Ireland between 2007 and 2013; only Turkey, Cyprus and Greece fared worse (UNICEF 2014).

In terms of youth unemployment, Ireland (along with Greece and Spain) was a standout statistic. Youth unemployment rates moved from a low of 6.2 per cent just before the collapse to 31.20 per cent in 2012 (Central Statistics Office 2012). Youth unemployment was, in some ways, a poster child of the economic collapse, fostering a flurry of EU level youth policy initiatives, most notably a Youth Guarantee which proposed that all young people under the age of 25 should receive a ‘good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education’ (European Commission 2013). Even in 2015, with Ireland’s startling recovery to 7 per cent economic growth (Beesley 2015), youth unemployment rates remained at around 20 per cent and concerns about long term impacts on a generation of young people remained (Bauman 2011, Scarpetta, Sonnet, and Manfredi 2010). In a resurgent economy declining general unemployment rates offer no guarantees that stable, decent jobs will suddenly become available for young people (UNICEF 2014).

This context provided the impetus for our research. It brought into focus the *why* of meaningful workplace learning for those young people who were moving from a primary engagement in education to a primary engagement in employment. From the 1960s in both the UK and Ireland, along with other developed nations, there have been recurring policy concerns over the intertwined issues of senior school disengagement and youth unemployment (Steedman and Stoney 2004, Clerkin 2013). There is now a large body of literature that supports the argument that workplace learning offers benefits for young people who might be disenchanted with the dominant forms of school learning. These benefits include enhanced engagement with learning; improved attendance and aspiration for further education; the development of maturity, confidence and self-esteem; school enjoyment, improved behaviour and attitude to learning; and enhanced personal, social and employability skills (see, for example, Guile and Young 2003, Gorard and See 2011, White and Laczik 2016, Lumby 2012).

At the time of our research, young people in Ireland, and elsewhere, who – by choice or necessity – wanted to move directly into employment on leaving second level school² were finding themselves faced with the prospect of greater levels of competition for fewer employment opportunities. Workplace learning has a role to play here: work experience in and of itself functions as a credential, or for those who have completed an initial school qualification, as an additional credential (Hoffman 2011). Credentials equip the individual in the competition for the limited employment opportunities of the risk society (Beck 1992). Given the collapse in opportunities even for part-time work for young school leavers in Ireland, workplace learning provided in the context of the senior school curriculum potentially provided the *only* opportunity to gain initial work experience. The debate over what, if any, role education systems *should* play in the formation of employability skills — the generic capabilities, attributes and dispositions that support young people in gaining and sustaining employment — is not the focus of this paper; the position taken here is that schools do have a role to play even if the extent of that role is a point of heated debate. Workplace learning undertaken by school students in real workplaces is central to the development of employability skills (Hoffman 2011).

In approaching our research, we theorized that workplace learning for and by students

² This paper is focused on the transition from second level school to employment. However, graduate employment opportunities have also been severely affected by the recessionary context (Donnelly 2013).

was not just about the readiness and willingness of a particular student. Rather, the potential for student learning would, we suggested, be dependent on the assemblage that formed *around* their learning: on the individual and also on the collective learning of teachers, on the organizational learning that happened within the students' schools, and on the learning affordances (Billett 2001) orchestrated within workplace learning placements. Accordingly, our research questions were:

How do teachers conceptualize work experience and/or part-time work activities of students?

How embedded is workplace learning in the curriculum of the school?

To what extent, and how, does learning generated in and through the organization, delivery and experience of workplace learning diffuse throughout the broader school setting?

In this, does it make a difference depending on who arranges workplace learning experiences?

In this, we were mindful of prior evidence that learning takes place through participation in work, not simply by being present in a workplace³ (Billett 2004, Lave and Wenger 1991). Involved in this *how* of workplace learning were a range of human actors including parents, employers and teachers. However, as the research progressed the role of a number of nonhuman actors also became evident: school timetables, curriculum documents, budgets, technology, credentialism, health and safety policies, consumer objects, family traditions and so on. These 'acted on' how workplace learning was conceptualized at the school level, how it was implemented, how it was practised and what happened subsequent to workplace learning placements.

The focus of these complicated discussions concerning the *why* and *how* of workplace learning is not just about enhancing the transition prospects of young people in the context of high rates of youth joblessness. It is also about enhanced practices in twenty-first century schools, practices that allow young people to work and learn at the same time, a key competency for twenty-first century workplaces (Rogers-Chapman and Darling-Hammond 2013, Hoffman 2011). Additionally, it is about ensuring that workplace learning does not inadvertently result in a reinforcement of *negative* perceptions of school if the positive aspects of workplace learning are noticeably absent on return to classroom settings (Hall and Raffo 2004). And, finally, it is about how assemblages of workplace learning and classroom learning might offer possibilities for meaningful forms of curriculum not constrained in advance by customary structures and practice. In this paper I revisit the original research to look more closely at a range of human and nonhuman actors (Latour 1999). My intent is to illuminate the limits and possibilities of workplace learning in one school with a strong commitment to such practice. The paper commences with a necessary, but brief, overview of the policy status of workplace learning in the senior school in Ireland. It then moves to a limited literature review subsequent to which the original research and the present analytical perspective are introduced. The paper closes with a number of reflections that might inform policy and practice around workplace learning for senior school students in Ireland, and elsewhere.

Workplace learning and the senior school curriculum in the Republic of Ireland

³ This is not to say that nothing is learnt by 'simply being present'; as researchers we are well aware much can be learnt. However, if the learning in question is skill-development then participation in work is pivotal.

The senior school curriculum in Ireland currently comprises a three-year Junior Cycle starting at age 12 followed by a three-year Senior Cycle leading to one of a number of Leaving Certificate qualifications that are completed over two years: the Established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, or the Leaving Certificate Applied. It is perhaps unsurprising that the vast majority of students in Ireland — a land of Saints and Scholars — enrol in programmes focused on entry to higher education, a high-stakes process conducted by a Central Admissions Office (CAO) (Banks and Smyth 2015). However, the first year of the Senior Cycle is a nominally optional non-examination Transition Year that students can opt into and, while workplace learning is facilitated in all forms of the senior school curriculum, it is in Transition Year that workplace learning is often deemed to have its curricular home given the flexibility offered by this non-examination year ⁴.

Transition Year first appeared in 1974 – an earlier period of economic crisis in Ireland – initially with limited uptake by students (Jeffers 2011). From 1994 participation increased, in part as a result of financial incentives and practical supports being introduced. Whilst Jeffers’ findings showed some ambivalence in the community with Transition Year being ‘embraced and resisted simultaneously’ (Jeffers 2011, 70-1) – even labelled at times as a ‘doss year’ (Walshe 2009) – there has been consistent growth in Transition Year take-up over the years (Clerkin 2013).

Transition Year is costly to run and, for those schools who offer the year, costs that exceed the financial support provided by government are passed on to students and their families. However, research suggests this non-examination year which allows for engagement in a wide-range of more exploratory options has an influence on increased maturity, greater confidence, social competence and social awareness: students who complete Transition Year generally also experience a positive impact on subsequent academic performance (Clerkin 2012) and, one might assume, higher levels of employability skills. Students in Transition Year commonly spend up to one full day a week in a workplace setting. Yet Transition Year sits in tension with other actors in the Irish context of second level education, most notably the senior school assessment practices and the resultant ‘brutally fair’ (Walshe 2015) points ‘race’ which underpins university offers, an issue I have explored elsewhere (Kamp forthcoming).

Practice in practice: associating the actors

It has been argued that workplace learning that is undertaken by students often permits only limited learning opportunities (Jeffers 2006, Boersma et al. 2010). McGonagle (2006) suggests that while workplace learning has the potential to be a valuable learning experience, many actors exist within such a programme, each with different roles and each enacting that role with particular motivations and limitations. Clearly, not all students will achieve the same benefits. For McGonagle, this does not devalue workplace learning but, rather, ‘reflects the need to ensure that students are fully prepared before, monitored during and debriefed after the work placement’ (2006, 78). This recommendation may well be accurate, but is insufficient. Even if we focus only on human actors, the OECD argues that it is necessary for *all* stakeholders – rather than only students – to be trained and prepared for the full process of workplace learning (Scarpetta and Sonnett 2012). The OECD authors suggest school staff prepare the student *and* the employer by identifying the purpose, expected outcomes, and roles and responsibilities related to the workplace learning both during, and subsequent to, any placement. As Huddleston (2012, 70) explains, this is a ‘significant undertaking and

⁴ By way of example, during fieldwork when I would introduce the project focus of workplace learning, the common response from participants was ‘Oh, you mean Transition Year.’

involves a set of complex relationships between students, parents/carers, teacher, employers ... essentially ... [it is] a shared enterprise.’ While this perspective goes beyond McGonagle’s argument for student preparation, it is my position that it remains insufficient. While Huddleston speaks to a broader range of *human* actors the focus still renders opaque the *full* range of actors, both human and nonhuman, who interfere – in positive and negative ways – with workplace learning.

Teacher learning is similarly an example of a collective event involving a range of human and nonhuman actors. Initial teacher education commonly includes workplace learning in the form of the placement as a key component yet research with pre-service teachers, including VET teachers, suggests a disjuncture between what is anticipated in placements and what occurs (Goh and Zukas 2016). In part, this reflects tensions in the identity of teachers-as-students yet it might also reflect tensions between what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as old-timers and newcomers and the extent of newcomers’ access to work and levels of participation (Pang 2015). These dynamics foreground the fluidity of learning where place, practice and person are constantly being reassembled. Similarly, effective workplace learning for *all* second level students – not just those students deemed to be at risk of disengagement from education – demands high levels of co-operation between schools and workplaces (Tynjala 2008, 150), and involves a much wider range of actors if teachers are to be able to engineer the ‘learning factors’ of workplace learning contexts to enhance student learning (Kyndt, Dochy, and Nijs 2009, Li et al. 2009).

An expansive learning environment (Fuller and Unwin 2006) is one that presents diverse opportunities to learn, in a culture that values and supports learning. Clearly this focus on diverse opportunities and culture brings a broad range of actors into consideration: teaching timetables, the configuration and use of the staffroom and its furniture, contracts of employment, set textbooks, looming end of year examinations, high-speed Internet access (along with some device on which to access it), school evaluation processes and so on⁵. Thus workplace learning is in part a consequence of the action of nonhuman actors who shape, as well as being shaped by, human actors (Latour 1999). This is a provocative suggestion that will be explored in greater detail in the second half of this paper but first I provide a brief overview of the research.

The process of data generation

The research was qualitative, using an array of methods, and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at both universities. First, a desktop review of policy documents in both jurisdictions related to workplace learning within the senior school curriculum was undertaken, along with a limited review of recent research on workplace learning in the context of education. Second, semi-structured interviews were in six schools (four interviews in two schools in the Republic of Ireland). Purposive sampling was used: in the Republic of Ireland, two Catholic boys’ schools were selected (one rural, one urban). Both schools were under the same patronage body; both were non-selective. Interviews were conducted with school leaders, teachers, and Transition Year co-ordinators or guidance counsellors. An interview schedule was used for all interviews.

Third, the quantitative aspect of the research comprised an on-line survey. In the Republic of Ireland, the survey was circulated to the full membership of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors; 40 responses were received. The present paper reviews survey and

⁵ A feature of Latour’s work is this process of listing: a ‘roster of beings’ (Harman 2009, 102). Harman explains this as a ‘stylistic antidote’ to remind the reader of the multitude of things, both human and nonhuman.

interview data generated in the Republic of Ireland only and was subject to thematic analysis to explore the traces of mediating actors in the practice of workplace learning.

Data analysis was conducted in two phases. The original interview transcripts and survey data from Ireland were separated and open coded for potential actors. The data were then reworked using purposive coding (Richards 2005) to trace relations including how, and whether, various actors were causing others to act, that is, becoming apparent as fully-fledged actors. This process progressed with a continual weaving back and forth between transcript, transcript notes, survey data, the literature and texts on Actor-Network Theory as a body of work, most notably the concepts of Bruno Latour and it is to a necessarily limited overview of the concepts I am taking up that I now turn.

Workplace learning, mediators and intermediaries

Actor-Network Theory⁶ (ANT) is the name of an ‘array of practices’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, x) that engage with the idea of exploring – rather than either assuming or ignoring – the full range of actors that are present in social practice. A defining position for ANT is that there is no difference in the treatment of human and nonhuman actors: a generalized ‘symmetry’ prevails that dispenses with the kinds of categorical distinctions that are usually taken to be foundational (Law 2004).

ANT is an approach to understanding the social that is focused on rendering visible this diverse range of actors —and their ‘intimate nature’ (Latour 2007, 39) as intermediaries or mediators. An entity that is an intermediary ‘transports meaning or force without transformation’ (Latour 2007, 39-40): whatever is its input will also be its output. Intermediaries are rare exceptions. However, there are endless mediators that ‘transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry’ (Latour 2007, 39). Latour notes that no matter how complicated an intermediary is, it can be easily forgotten. A mediator, however, is complex no matter how simple it may look. The distinction is important because, to paraphrase Latour (2007, 105) if a social factor such as a policy around workplace learning is transported through intermediaries, then everything important is *in the policy*, not in the intermediaries, whether human or nonhuman. Clearly this is not the case given policies around ensuring the senior school curriculum includes workplace learning play out with immense variation to greater or lesser benefit of students, schools and employers.

However, the concept of mediation can, and must, be further differentiated to consider the different ways that nonhumans can make us act. Latour (1993, 178-90) outlines four meanings of mediation. First, mediation can relate to *interference* whereby each agent interferes with, or translates, the original goal of the other. Here, Latour uses the example of the human and the gun: the hybrid-actor that is human-gun translates the goals of both into an often unintended, composite goal: ‘you are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it.’ In this way, it becomes clear that responsibility for action must be shared among the various actants with their diverse programmes of action.

The second meaning of mediation is *composition*. Here, mediation allows us to consider how the composite goal becomes the common achievement of each of the agents. Here, the focus is on how action is actually composed as ‘a property of associated entities.’ This point might be illustrated by considering the case of workplace learning. Actor 1 – let’s say a teacher – is ‘allowed, authorized, enabled, afforded’ by other actors. That there may be a prime mover – be it school policy, community, the memories of the teacher of positive work experience, a crisis of youth unemployment, school evaluation processes, the Principal

⁶ For Latour (2007, 9) ‘a name that is so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that it deserves to be kept’.

(and so on) – does not in any way change the need to explore the composition of all forces if the event is to be better understood and, potentially, enhanced.

The third meaning of mediation considers a process of *black boxing*. The argument here is that the more something succeeds, the less it can be understood as attention need focus only on inputs and outputs rather than the complexity that connects input and output. Here, Latour offers the example of the overhead projector: a silent and mute intermediary, completely determined by its function, that is, until such time as it breaks down: ‘Whereas a moment before the projector scarcely existed, now even its parts have individual existence, each its own “black box”’. In thinking about workplace learning each ‘part’ – school policy, Department of Education legislation, the local labour market, teacher(s), timetables, the evening paper, an employer, the Irish economy – is a black box, often not the focus of attention until something changes in the anticipated flow and complexity immediately becomes apparent. What, in ‘routine use’, is assumed to be one thing is, in a crisis, revealed to be composed of several things that might not even be strategically aligned and that will vary in terms of their stability and complexity.

The fourth, and most important, meaning of mediation is *delegation*: the way both meaning and expression are delegated to non-human objects. Latour offers the example of speed bump: in reducing the speed of cars the speed bump replaces the police officer, changing the *form* of expression of the law. However, delegation also changes the *matter* of expression of the law. Whereas a law requiring drivers to slow down may be intended to make the road safer, the speed bump achieves the ‘slowing down’ by delegation: what was a moral imperative now becomes a selfish imperative; the driver slows down not to protect people but rather to avoid damage to the car. Delegation illuminates how a ‘prime mover’ can be absent, yet present: ‘in delegation ... an action, long past, of an actor, long disappeared, is still active here, today, on me. I live in the midst of technical *delegates*; I am folded into nonhumans’ (Latour 1993, 189, original emphasis). My intent in the balance of this paper is to apply these diverse meanings of mediation to highlight the full range of actors, and the way they made others act, in regard to workplace learning in two second level schools in Ireland.

Interfering with/translating the goals of others

Let’s start at a beginning. The survey data indicated that in the majority of schools (60 percent) it was usual for students to be given responsibility for the organization of their workplace learning events, the rationale being that it offered students more ownership of their placement and enabled them to practice their skills in making direct approaches to prospective employers. Students were, however, guided on appropriate placements. For instance, they were encouraged to seek opportunities beyond those available within their familial network. However, there was recognition among the research participants that this student-led process did not facilitate higher-level learning opportunities given it weakened the opportunity of teachers and workplace staff to collaborate in the design of higher-level learning environments (Billett 2001). For instance, only 15 percent of survey respondents indicated that subject teachers were involved in discussions about workplace learning arrangements. This deferral of the opportunity for teachers to work collaboratively with individual employers in imagining and creating expansive learning environments for students on workplace learning might not have been so consequential if not for other nonhuman actors that were interfering with the goal to create conditions for higher-level learning within workplace learning events. In particular, the Irish economy with its crisis in government funding and consequent moratorium of staff recruitment was changing the aspirations teachers held for their students. Transition Year co-ordinators now had limited time to move

outside of the school and this changed the forms of association between school and employers:

Work experience takes place here on a Friday and up to this I had four classes off on a Friday morning that I'd be in town here from nine o'clock and I would do my trips round and I would meet and like the politicians, I'd press flesh with them, discuss things with them. ... this year it's getting tougher because we have less staff and I have less time on a Friday to get out and see them. (ROI Interview)

This co-ordinator – who had broad experience and valued the potential of workplace learning as a vital ingredient in the senior curriculum – was reconciling increased demand with loss of capacity. As an ‘obligatory passage point’ — a ‘mandatory point of entry where everyone else is forced to trade’ (Latour 1987, 132) — all the associations through which workplace learning would be designed and enriched came to rest with the Transition Year co-ordinator, queuing for attention with all the other conflicting demands faced by all teachers on any given day. Survey responses from the Republic placed the most significant limitation to successful workplace learning as lack of time to work with employers (82.5 per cent rating this first or second as a barrier). There was now limited connection between the school and the workplace other than that performed by the student themselves and this had changed the workplace learning assemblage, forcing it to rely on trust⁷:

it's forty lads, it is hard, it is hard. But the students we have are very decent young men and it's all built on trust with them. We trust that they're there, we've never had an issue of a student going out of a work placement and a follow up student going out and never getting in there because of the record left by the previous one is so it works well for us. (ROI Interview)

This reliance on trust also extended to the preparation of workplace learning: participants indicated that, fortunately, employers were experienced, they knew the school's goals for workplace learning and understood their role and responsibilities⁸. However, when new employers were approached teachers *had* to be closely involved if the school was to be confident that workplace learning was a valuable component of the student's learning experience.

It is important to stress that this focus on the role of teachers in connection with employer is not to endow teachers with some form of power and, or, responsibility to cause things to happen. Rather, Latour (2007, 217) emphasizes that the mediator modifies action through *attachment*. It is through a process of assemblage where connection causes change. For example, participants would note how, while wanting students to arrange their workplace learning events, the co-ordinator might well be acting – through back doors and community connections – so that there was a pre-attachment, a readiness in the employer for a student's approach. Other mediators were also cited often by participants. These included transport networks which acted on the range of possibilities, as well as parents who mobilized, or not, various workplace learning possibilities through familial networks.

Composition: shared practices and common achievements

If action is indeed a property of associated entities, then ANT suggests an outcome can only be calculated by being attentive to *all* mediating actors. Here, a respondent noted how very generative possibilities could be effected through ‘good’ workplace learning placements,

⁷ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

⁸ While it was beyond the scope of the research, further research to explore whether a relationship of trust interfered with the goals of co-ordinators would be illuminating.

particularly into professions such as teaching. For example, students could connect their workplace learning and school learning through the obligatory passage point of a receptive teacher. This demanded the teacher actively maintain awareness of what the student had been involved in during their workplace learning, building connections with lesson content, to the benefit of all students. This, in turn could translate into an enter score for application to higher education, then potentially through to teaching practice back in the same school. Other mediators would be apparent in the progression into the profession – sports clubs, exam scripts, school placement reports, mandated recruitment processes, family connections, an appropriate wardrobe and so on, leading eventually to employment in the school. Clearly the input – workplace learning – and the output – employment as a teacher – are neither directly or necessarily connected but can be more clearly understood through an exploration of composition.

One actor in particular merits more detailed consideration. While workplace learning is an accepted part of the educational landscape, credentialism is arguably the dominant nonhuman actor in second level schooling in the Republic of Ireland⁹. Beyond Transition Year, teachers made multiple references to how they acted in regard to Leaving Certificate points, a situation created from an assemblage of multiple allies including daily paper – with its yearly cycle of intense coverage focused on everything from how students should select subjects to maximise their points to a excruciating analysis of exam paper questions. Leaving Certificate points become an end in themselves, forming an alliance with the labour market, concerned parents, university entrance procedures, curriculum documents, reality television, grinds, post-Leaving Certificate holidays and parties and so on. This assemblage acted against the policy direction: survey respondents indicated the great majority of workplace learning (65 percent) was timetabled in Transition Year rather than Leaving Certificate years, with only six respondents indicating any workplace learning in the Established Leaving Certificate. It also displaced goals that encourage the study of a given subject area for the learning inherent in it with instrumental, high-stakes, stress laden goals focused on maximising the chance of a successful transition to higher education, a transition on which your ‘whole life’ depends (Banks and Smyth 2015, Kamp forthcoming). Definitions of school success were also powerful mediators; regardless of the richness of what goes on in schools, anything that threatened time for what was deemed to be academic work is compromised, lessened, positioned as a distraction of questionable value for many stakeholders, even for some teachers who equated learning benefit solely with points:

At the moment there is the points system, there are the points ... I wouldn't see that [workplace learning] had any benefit at the moment because do you know as I said they don't get any recognition for it.

Invisible action: unpacking the black box

According to Latour (2007, 80), ‘objects, no matter how important, efficient, central or necessary they may be, tend to recede into the background very fast [...] and the greater their importance, the faster they disappear.’ This meaning of mediation where what’s actually going on is rendered invisible by its normal operation, and rendered visible only at its breakdown, was evident in participants’ comments around the availability of workplace learning placements. The economy as a fully-fledged actor, interfering with the goals of others, became apparent at the point of ‘break down’ occasioned by the fallout of the GFC:

⁹ In a UK review, Steedman and Stoney (2004) suggest concerns of educational disaffection in the early 1960s coincided with the extension of public examinations to the whole 14-16 group, effectively undermining anything other than ‘academic’ curriculum.

there was kind of two sides to the recession that we are having at the minute in that some places weren't offering work placements because of the recession and some places were because of it. ... It was evident that some places didn't exist anymore for a start, so people just didn't have the jobs, especially in the trades where lads might have been working on building sites and so on. ... So that became evident. But then in other places where self-employed people had little businesses they were happy to take on what they seen, I suppose without being crude about it, what they seen as free labour.

Familiar actors – employers with long associations with the school who had, over the boom years of the Celtic Tiger, connected with the school and built up stores of experience on how to work with students on placement – were no longer around. For those who were still in business, it became apparent to some teachers that goals were, at times, displaced as mediators connected to the employer – including stuttering cash flow and angry debtors, the practices of banks and bank managers (in themselves now revealed as a multiplicity of actors each with its own history of earlier transactions), diminishing local markets and fiercely competitive offshore markets and so on – changed the program of action. Thus, the action of 'the recession' at the level of the employer in regard to their engagement, or not, with workplace learning for school students needed to be carefully unpacked and, at times, reassembled. At the same time, the opportunity provided through students' 'out of school' part-time work, infrequent as it had become, was increasingly valued by teachers: survey responses indicated that 67.5 percent of teachers valued the opportunities for learning and experience inherent in part-time work that was unconnected to anything the school arranged.

Considering those actors who are absent, yet present

For Latour, this fourth meaning of mediation is the most important. Delegation — 'crossing the boundary between signs and things' — refers to a process whereby the introduction of an actor changes both expression and meaning of a goal. In this use, mediation sheds light on those actors who are no longer present, yet remain fully active. Here, we might consider how curriculum as a nonhuman actor changes both the expression and meaning of workplace learning, particularly in regard to the potential for learning from workplaces to connect to learning in classrooms and into learning within the school itself as to how its practice might be undertaken in ways that could make a meaningful contribution to concerns for young people transitioning to first time employment. Yet participants indicated that there was limited learning for anyone other than (potentially) the student who was directly involved in workplace learning. When probed on this, participants who were classroom teachers offered diverse responses. For some, the potential for connections between workplace learning and school learning had not been made explicit: 'I never thought of that ... if I knew what they're doing... I could do a topic ... I never ever thought of connecting the two'. However, for others in the same school there was no acknowledgement of any potential value: 'I don't see how I could use anything they are using out there'.

In other words, the workplace learning about the practices of industry which the student carried back into the school flowed through some classrooms with no impact whatsoever: the learning was not acknowledged, let alone transformed, amplified or kept alive. That curriculum pressure was a mediating actor in this passive assemblage seems possible. Interviewees were asked to speculate on the ways that workplace learning by students could contribute productively to classroom, and school, learning:

It could have, but it didn't. ... [Teachers] don't have much experience themselves in a workplace other than teaching and they are so focused on, 'what has that got to do with me? I am here to teach maths. So what? Johnny is in my maths class, he did his work experience. Good for him. But I am here to teach him maths. And I have a curriculum that has to be covered. I have papers that have to be corrected. There is an exam

coming up in x amount of days. I'd love to hear about his work experience' is probably what they would say, 'however I just don't have time because if I am listening to Johnny's story I have thirty others who want me to listen to their story and there won't be one sum done in the room.' ... The syllabus and the curriculum is just crammed and there is so much stuff to get through and teachers are so focused on that. So in theory it would be brilliant if that feedback got back to everybody but the reality is that it doesn't. (Teacher, School A)

it is only the teacher that is there at the time that is hearing that interaction. With schedules getting so busy, and teachers' time getting so busy, so much more being packed into such a small amount of time, like it is nearly impossible to get a meeting to pull all the teachers together at this stage. To disseminate that information, the issue of communication comes into it. Effective, meaningful communication. ... we can write about it in the school magazine, we can document it, we can send an email out to staff. ... Now we can communicate through that but how many are on the other side reading it? (Teacher, School B)

In both these schools, the meaning of workplace learning was translated from a powerful potential to a distraction from the core business of schools: completing the curriculum and ensuring achievement in external examinations which would manifest in Leaving Certificate points and university offers. Participants noted that often it was the staffroom that offered the possibility for informal learning to occur, yet a packed curriculum also meant that many teachers were rarely present in the staffroom.

This rehearsal of some of the forms of mediation bring into consideration the full range of actors that undermine the potential of workplace learning, even where highly-experienced teachers with vision for its transformative potential were in leadership roles. Time, money-in-its-absence, anger at government policies, the school timetable, the consequences of the economic collapse on the local labour market and so on were all mediators that, in one form or another, influenced how policies on workplace learning played out in each of the schools.

Concluding thoughts

The research this paper draws on was conducted in a particular time and place: the island of Ireland at the time of what eventually came to be known as 'the Great Recession'. The impact of that recession on the opportunities for young people moving into employment for the first time was profound and, while a welcome economic recovery is now gaining momentum, the importance of young people being supported to compete for sustainable employment opportunities has not diminished and access to generative workplace learning opportunities that offer both the opportunity to gain vital work experience and to deepen their learning has a contribution to make in this regard. This research has demonstrated that both human and nonhuman actors – curriculum, teachers, recruitment policies, the Leaving Certificate (with its hordes of invested allies), business owners and family friends, parking meters, ICT and so on – mediated the potential for workplace learning of senior students, even when 'prime movers' – usually Transition Year coordinators or guidance counsellors – had a sophisticated understanding of and commitment to the importance of well-organized workplace learning for their students.

The research highlighted the potential value in building capacity for communities of practice for workplace learning; as persuasively demonstrated by Cate Watson (2014, 27). Such professional learning communities can support school staff to initiate change, offering fora where dissonance on the role, value, process and result of (for instance) workplace learning in the senior school curriculum, can act as a driver for change and innovation in

school and workplace learning settings. The data which this paper revisits suggested there was an almost complete lack of opportunity for teachers to work collaboratively, let alone collaboratively with employers and other stakeholders. While creating this kind of opportunity could be argued to be a case of mind-set and contextual affordance rather than specific resourcing, it is dependent on a degree of redundancy in the system that had slowly eroded in the context of the recession and a moratorium on staff recruitment.

Through workplace learning placements, vocational networks (employers) and academic networks (schools) become allies. Accordingly to Latour (1988), it is through alliance, rather than some kind of essential strength, that something becomes powerful. The academic curriculum in schools has assembled very powerful allies: parental expectations, university entrance processes, the media, grind schools and so on. The possibilities for the value of vocational learning to be elevated beyond its traditional position as some lesser than academic learning through beneficial alliance are important. Not just for individual students or schools, or individual employers but, rather, for an education system seeking to equip its young people for the diverse challenges they will face as they move beyond school to become productive engaged, socially included, members of society.

This paper has given some indication that policy does matter. In the Republic of Ireland workplace learning in the senior school does not have the same level of policy and procedural support as, for example, the practicum in pre-service teacher education (The Teaching Council 2013). However, in demonstrating the role of mediators the paper also highlights that not *everything* is in the policy; there is no way to evaluate policy other than through its action and that action occurs through a process of association (Harman 2009). The intent here is not to make some kind of claim to generalizability; such a claim would be in tension with my theoretical approach. Rather, the intent is to illustrate how many kinds of entities can, and do, participate in the assemblage of workplace learning; many kinds of entities could be assembled in the pursuit of generative workplace learning opportunities. At the time of this research, with the primacy of ‘points’ and the stripping of resources where the obligatory passage point became one, busy, isolated, human being — perhaps a Transition Year Co-ordinator or a Guidance Counsellor — ‘things’ related to workplace learning were less than they could have been. It is imperative that academics and practitioners committed to the importance of workplace learning in the context of senior school in these first, fragile, decades of the twenty-first century are attentive to the ‘missing masses’: the full range of mediators – both human and nonhuman – who open up cracks and spaces for innovation and collaboration.

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